Whose Story is it?
Conflict and Roleplay in Narrative Writing

By Wayne Amtzis

The method presented here-one that I have used with Nepali college students-provides the basis for a course in narrative writing for students of English as a foreign language. Examining setting, character, and action, students work in groups, generating a framework for understanding and writing short fictional narratives. Through roleplay, the students develop characters suitable to their own stories. A series of tasks introduces students to the underlying structure of short fiction and allows them to begin writing stories of their own.

This method for teaching narrative writing, and American short stories, is taken from my reading of *An Approach to Literature* by Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren and Creating a Role by Constantin Stanislavski In their role as literary critics, Warren and Brooks utilize setting, character, and action as a framework for ordering the discrete events of a short story. For them,"conflict is the dynamic of action," containing within its presentation and resolution the thematic basis for understanding a text.

Stanislavski in his "method" for training actors also looks at the relation of character, action and setting. His suggestions for getting at the inner life of a story and his emphasis on the emotional life of a character complement the analytical framework presented by Warren and Brooks. (See Footnote 1 below) His movement between exterior and interior analysis, from "passive" to "active imagining" (see Footnote 2 below) is one I try to imitate in the classroom and which I have set forth in the Procedure section below.

I present a series of tasks that rely on group dynamics and interaction for their completion. Taking conflict as a point of departure, the students adopt the roles of different characters to develop stories that examine the relationship between conflict and character. The teacher guides the students through what Stanislavski calls "active imagining," allowing them to enter into the "inner circumstances" of the stories they are writing.

Procedure

What follows is a series of writing tasks, and a teacher- directed review of the students' work. The roles of both the teacher and the students will be considered.

Assignment 1: Narrate a Conflict (for the group)

Tell the students that they are going to be working in groups, writing about a specific place, the people there and an incident that has occurred. As a group they will decide what to write about, but they will write as individuals. Each one will ultimately write from the point of view of one of the people involved; i. e., each student will narrate a conflict from the perspective of a participant, in the first person singular. The situation they will be writing about is one that involves conflict. Their stories should emphasize interaction and the unfolding conflict, and relate the thoughts and feelings of the characters whose roles they have assumed.

Preparation 1: Considering the Setting

a. Have the students work in groups to consider places they are familiar with and can describe in a few sentences. They should limit themselves to public settings where a variety of people are likely to be found. Each group should decide on one setting. In their notebooks students should list a few words describing the place and a few of the people who might be seen there. (See Footnote 3 below)
b. Tell the students that each member of the group will write independently about the place and the people they see there. Begin the writing session by in this way: "Imagine yourself there, in the setting you have chosen, unnoticed, but observing both the place and the people. Now focus on one person. What is he/she doing? Is the person alone or waiting for someone? Or is the person engaged in animated conversation? If so with whom? When the place and the persons there seem vivid, begin writing. Simply describe what you see."
c. When students have finished writing, the teacher should guide them back to the setting with a change in perspective from observer to participant. The teacher could begin this way: "Return to the scene as you imagined it, but as if you were the person you have begun describing. Now look at the surroundings and the people there from the eyes of that person. Has anything changed? Someone else is entering your field of vision. Has that person always been there, or has he/she just arrived? Focus on this person as he/she begins to talk to you.

Now begin writing in the first person singular, using "I" as if you were the person you have already described. How do you feel being there? What is it you want? Who is

this person speaking to you? Is he/she a help, or a hindrance? Describe his/her actions as well as your own. But step back, don't forget where you are. Describe the setting as well."

Review 1: Considering the Character

a. After completing this task, students stop and share what they have written with the other students in their group. Exchange notebooks and after reading what a classmate has written, the student underlines what he/she considers to be the most important action, and in the margin writes three or four words to describe the person who is speaking in the first person singular. The teacher directs the students to return the notebooks. "Look at how your classmate describes the person you are writing about. Do these adjectives fit? How would you describe the character?"
b. "How would you describe yourself? List three adjectives. Are they different from the adjectives you used to describe the character in your story? How would you act in the situation described? How would the character act? Go back in your imagination to the place, the scene, and the situation."
c. Students have the option to begin a journal with entries considering the personality of the character in the story and their own personality. They can include hopes, perceptions or dreams that their character may have had before or after the crucial action in the story occurs. This will help to explain the motivation underlying the action of the story.

Rewrite 1: Changing Perspective

a. As a group, the students consider all the characters. They list three adjectives to describe each one. (The adjectives should fit the action of the story.) Then they rewrite the story from the viewpoint of one of the *other*persons involved. The teacher coaches, "remember, you are not the person you were yesterday, you are someone else with a different goal in mind. What is it you want? How can you achieve your goal? When you feel that you are this person, begin writing."
b. The students share their new version with the other members in the group. Again they underline the key action, and list three adjectives that describe the person speaking in the first person singular. In their journals, they enter a description of the person they are now writing about. They consider how this character's personality differs from their own or from their classmate's.

Review 2: Coordin Working together, the students compare narratives, focusing on the setting and the interaction of the characters. (See Footnote 4 below) The setting (and the relationship of the characters to the setting) can have as much influence on the action as the characters themselves. The students are asked why the characters are there. What is it about this place that causes the characters to act as they do? The students list three phrases to describe the setting and then turn their focus upon the characters, their interaction and conflict. ***ating Setting, Character, and Action***

If this review leads the students to realize that one or more of their characters must be recast in terms of personality traits and subsequent plot development, all students in the group should once again coordinate their perceptions. This can be done quickly by listing character traits, and by developing a brief scenario of the characters' actions and interactions.

Preparation 2: Talking through the conflict

The students discuss the interaction between the characters, clarifying the situation and the perspective of everyone involved. They settle on three words to describe the personalities of each character. They are asked to consider whether their descriptive words fit the action? If not, they look once again at the interaction and conflict and take on the roles of the participants. Each student then writes a scenario of the action as his/her character sees it.

Assignment 2: Narrate a Conflict (for the class)

Once each group has decided upon a conflict situation, the course of events, the characters and their motivations, each student should write a narrative recounting what happened from the point of view of one of those involved, though not necessarily the person whose role they have taken thus far. When the students are finished, they should exchange stories and check to see if they have kept to the agreed-upon story line. Then they should make a final copy to share with other groups in the class.

Review 3: Reading the Stories in Class

When the students have plotted the action and have looked at their stories as they unfold from the point of view of the different characters, they are ready to present their stories to other groups or to the whole class. Ask each member of a group to recount the story from their perspective or have the group as a whole act out the story's crucial encounters.

Students should be able to respond to the stories by identifying the character traits of the person speaking in the narrative, and by isolating and commenting upon the key interchange or action in the story. Both the teacher and class should look at what has been written within the framework of person, place, and action (interaction and conflict). By using the adjective lists as a check on both action and character, the students can see more clearly who and what they are writing about. In this way they can use the implications of setting and character to establish action and substantiate conflict.

Coordination and Follow-up: What Conflict? Whose Story?

Students often have difficulty initially choosing a story line that involves conflict. If the teacher overemphasizes the idea of conflict, students tend to reduce all situations to conflicts. Therefore it is better to work with whatever the students choose, with the teacher guiding the students to an understanding of the situation and the potential conflicts that exist between the people they are writing about.

At first students may not understand that they are being asked to identify with the person they are writing about and will enter the story as a witness who takes no direct part and merely reports what he sees. Having the students write the story from the viewpoint of the different people involved overcomes this tendency. The use of multiple viewpoints not only gives the students writing practice, but more importantly helps them understand the element of conflict that underlies all stories. Once the students get into their stories, the action seems to fall into place, the characters begin to reveal themselves, and the conflict-what is at stake in the story-becomes more clear.

A common pattern among students who are writing from a point of view, is to attribute negative intentions to the other characters and to describe the one whose role they have taken as flawless or at least a neutral party to the action. For example,one group was writing a story about a train journey through India, specifically about two occurrences that involved the main character, a traveler, on a brief stopover at Old Delhi station. Informed by the conductor that he had plenty of time, the traveler walked out on the platform and encountered a beggar and a hawker of sunglasses. In both instances the traveler appeared willing to part with his money, but found some excuse: the beggar wasn't really blind; the hawker was cheating him. The other students' stories corroborated this.

But if we step back from the main character's actions and question his motivation, couldn't we just as well say he was merely passing time at the station with no intention of spending any money? Wasn't he leading the others on? Suspicion and

tightfistedness guided his actions, and a sense of superiority involved him in the first place-a cat toying with mice. Perhaps we can turn this against him. Too involved in these games, he misses the train.

When the students step back from the situation, reconsider the characters and then review the action from the viewpoint of someone else, the plot develops and the interaction between the various characters reveals the conflict that will carry the students into a thematic understanding of their stories.

Preparation 3: Students Working Individually and as a Class

While the process in the classroom involves students working together on particular situations, the students should also be encouraged to write stories of their own. Some teachers may enthusiastically welcome stories that a student develops apart from the group, but if the class is large or if either teacher or students have difficulty with the tasks undertaken, the teacher can assign one particular situation to the class to review the fundamentals of narrative writing. Then the teacher can use one group's version as the basis for leading the class through their stories.

Final Draft: First Person or Third Person?

In rewriting their stories, students may find that the story is about one main character. If this is the case, in their final writing of the story, students can write that person's story though some may find that the story is better told from the point of view of one of the minor characters. All the characters should be named, or at least identified, and stand out as separate and distinct individuals.

If the teacher feels the students would benefit from rewriting their stories again, the final draft could be presented in the third person singular. The movement from first to third person narrative may also entail moving from one scene to a series of scenes. The immediacy of the first person supplanted by the objectivity of the third person allows the students to look at the basis of action. This task should be seen as following the work students have already done. Students should be told that when writing in the third person singular, they should recount the story concentrating on the conflict between the characters, their motivation, and the action that reveals the theme of the tale. In this way, with a final change of voice, the students will feel that they have begun to develop their storytelling skills.

Goals

The two basic goals of this course are to get the students to write (for themselves as well as for others), and to teach them how to write. When writing stories, it is useful to step back from what is being written to analyze the action. This allows students to use writing, and rewriting as a means of developing their ideas. At the same time they learn to look at a story in terms of setting, character, action, motivation, conflict-a unity-not an assortment of separate parts.

The first stories the teacher and students work on individually and in groups may be learning exercises. Having once become familiar with the approach, they can turn from situation to scene, from conflict to the resolution of conflict. By the end of the course, the groundwork should be laid for expressive story writing.

Conclusion

I have presented an approach to teaching narrative writing applicable for students of English as a foreign language. This approach makes use of two ideas: first, that conflict is the essential determinant of action in story writing; second, that the roles the characters play depend upon their motivation and assertiveness. In effect, it is the characters who write the story.

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References

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- Stanislavski, C. 1983. Creating a role. London: Methuen

Footnote 1

"There is a direct bond," Stanislavski asserts, "between the internal and external circumstances of a play. Indeed the inner life of the characters is concealed in the outer circumstances."

Footnote 2

"You can be the observer, but you can also take an active part-you can find yourself mentally in the center of circumstances and conditions which you have imagined. You no longer see yourself as outside onlooker. In time when this feeling is reinforced you can become the main, active personality in the surrounding circumstances."

Footnote 3

Photos or pictures taken from local newspapers and magazines of people and places the students are familiar with can serve as stimuli for setting character portrayals.

Footnote 4

Preparatory and review tasks have imaginative and analytical components. Students write freely or are guided by the teacher's questions and statements.